

HIGH SCHOOL-OHIO

Faith over fear: Roger Bacon football teammates, assistant coach bond through trying times

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Two-a-days, drenched in sweat while training in sweltering August heat may not sound like a comfort zone. Likewise, a football game in December's arctic winds where the ground feels like cement can be equally disturbing.

Still, young men bond over such circumstances when they are challenged.

Typically, there is a no-man-left-behind attitude. If one member of the team falls, several are there to pull him upright.

Two years ago on a Thursday, then-Roger Bacon freshman and junior varsity football player Richard Allen lost his father from a sudden ailment. The next night, he walked out for Roger Bacon varsity's coin flip. After the Spartans won, a coach handed him the game ball.

Another reason Allen attended that varsity game was to watch Zach Meister, then also a freshman, get the opportunity to dress with the big boys. Allen and Zach Meister have been playing football together since eighth grade.

At the school Grotto that night where the team goes to pray and reflect, Zach stayed behind to console his friend over something neither could understand.

Since he began as Roger Bacon's head coach, Mike Blaut has preached faith, family and football. The mantra has helped them on the field as they won back-to-back Miami Valley Conference-Scarlet Division championships and several playoff games with current Louisiana State University running back and Ohio Mr. Football Corey Kiner leading the charge.

Just as Kiner's leadership and example extended beyond the Roger Bacon football field, the Spartan players have meant more to each other than how they connect on the football field.

"Our guys buy into taking care of each other," Blaut said.

Among those taking Allen under his wing was Zach's father, assistant coach Ron Meister.

Earlier this year, Meister noticed a lump in his neck area. After putting it off, he finally had it checked. The diagnosis involved the word no one wants to hear.

Stage 4 cancer had metastasized to his lymph nodes. Ron has been a father figure to Richard since his father's death. When word got out about his situation, roles quickly reversed with Allen paying forward the comfort the Meisters gave him.

The support has been ongoing as the elder Meister underwent chemotherapy and radiation treatments at Good Samaritan Hospital for most of this year.

"I know how it feels," Allen said. "You're stressed out and you're just mad at everyone. I helped him push it through because of the things I went through. You just have faith, believe in your Dad, believe in yourself and believe in God. You do that and things come out positive. He (Zach) is like a brother. I can't explain it."

In addition to Richard's strong shoulders, the community stepped up to help, as well as others. Blaut is Roger Bacon's head coach but teaches at Oak Hills. During a 7-on-7 match-up this summer with the Highlanders, he had shirts made up that read, "Faith over Fear, Family Football, #MeisterStrong".

Ron was taken aback to see not only Roger Bacon's staff in the shirts but also the Oak Hills coaches.

Ron Meister opted for faith over fear, which has served him well. He's lost 40 pounds, still has a feeding tube in his stomach but is allowed to take in a designated amount of calories per day.

He has adopted a positivity most would envy. Rather than sit home, he has come to practice to influence and encourage the Spartans. On team picture day, when the photographer was about to snap a photo of Ron and Zach, Ron quickly invited Richard to be in the photo. Biological and surrogate sons broadly smiled.

"That made me feel good," Allen said. "It was a special moment. I wasn't expecting it and it was a great thing that he pulled me over to get a picture with them."

Ron Meister has a PET/CT scan soon and after eight months of trials, tribulation and frustration, he prays for positive news. The team is off to a fresh start, Bron Bacevich Stadium's bleachers have been pressure-washed and this fall capsule of life is a blessing for a man who wondered if he would see Zach and Richard graduate.

"I can't express my family's immense gratitude for the prayers, thoughts, kindness and love of the Spartan family," Ron Meister said. "On my darkest days, I realized I wasn't fighting this battle alone and how could I lose with so many others there with me?"

Roger Bacon's band of brothers have a tough non-conference schedule with Aiken, Newport Central Catholic, Badin and McNicholas ahead before they play the Miami Valley Conference teams. They'll remember the games but more importantly, the relationships like Allen has with the Meisters.

"A big part of the family aspect is we win together on Friday nights, but occasionally we lose together, too," Zach Meister said. "It's easy to be there for someone when things are going great. To be true family, you have to be there when it's hard. Richard's really helped out with me. My Dad thinks of Richard as a son. Football will come to an end eventually, but these friendships, these bonds, these brotherhoods, I don't think it will. "